

# IKIGAI

## THE JAPANESE SECRET TO A JOYFUL LIFE

*The Japanese word ikigai, which has recently gained attention worldwide and enjoys widespread use, refers to a passion that gives value and joy to life. The author who prompted its craze speaks about the word's appeal and the effects it has on mental and physical health.*

Numerous Japanese words have entered the global lexicon, such as *mottainai* and *kawaii*; one recent newcomer is *ikigai*. A broad concept, it refers to that which brings value and joy to life: from people, such as one's children or friends, to activities including work and hobbies.

"There is no word like it anywhere in the world," says

Héctor Garcia, co-author of the book *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, which helped push *ikigai* into the global spotlight. Explaining that having an *ikigai* is the key to leading a happy life with a healthy body and mind, this book—which has been translated into 63 languages—has sold more than 3 million copies since its release in 2016. "When

you feel down, just thinking about your *ikigai* will change something in you. I receive comments even now from readers who say their lives were transformed by this word," says Garcia.

For this book, Garcia interviewed more than 100 elderly residents of Ogimi Village, Okinawa Prefecture, renowned for being a "village of longevity." One thing



Héctor Garcia (second from right) and Francesco Miralles (far left), authors of *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, say that they realized how important and powerful *ikigai* was while interacting with the senior citizens of Ogimi Village, Okinawa Prefecture.

that these healthy and active seniors have in common is that each has an *ikigai*, or something worth living for. "When we asked what their *ikigai* was, they gave us explicit answers, such as their friends, gardening, and art. Everyone knows what the source of their zest for life is, and is busily engaged in it every day," says Garcia. Another distinguishing feature of this community is that the elders have strong social links with their peers and frequently get together to enjoy karaoke, birthday parties, and more. "Avoiding social isolation is linked to the motivation and confidence to lead active lives."

Continuing to work or energetically enjoy hobbies is characteristic of many Japanese seniors. A national survey conducted in 2018 found that 47.5% of people aged 70 and older are active in ways such as working, enjoying hobbies, or participating in community activities. Another study conducted on people aged 65 and over revealed that those who work only for financial

reasons, compared with those who work in pursuit of their *ikigai*, have a 1.55 times greater risk of decline in functional capacity two years later. Considering such data, the Japanese government is actively supporting the employment and social engagement of senior citizens. Borrowing the words of renowned psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, "What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him."

Garcia believes that this applies

not only to senior citizens, but to young people as well. In a UNICEF survey conducted in 21 countries in 2021, about 36% of young people (aged 15-24) responded that they often felt nervous, worried, or anxious, and 19% also said that they often felt depressed or had little interest in doing things. For such young people, Garcia published a new book, *Ikigai for Teens: Finding Your Reason for Being*, in 2021. "When we were children, we all thought about what we wanted to be in the future, but it is also important to think about your *ikigai* from a young age. If I had known about *ikigai* when I was young, my life would have been different."

If the word and all its edifying qualities are expanded across generations, *ikigai* may evolve to further heights as a universal term expressing a rich and fulfilling life.

In Ogimi Village, Okinawa Prefecture, many elderly people have an *ikigai* and remain active, such as TEDOKON Keiki (bottom right, on the left), who is 91 years old and still actively grows crops. There are also many events the elderly can participate in, including a sports festival (top right). TAIRA Toshiko (left), a 101-year-old textile artisan, has been making Bashofu, a traditional fabric, for many years. She was designated a Living National Treasure of Japan in 2000 for preserving this Okinawan craft. OGIMI VILLAGE



Garcia maintains that the Venn diagram provided in his book and created by American entrepreneur Marc Winn to illustrate the concept of *ikigai* (with the four categories of "what you love," "what the world needs," "what you can be paid for," and "what you are good at") can help you find your *ikigai* if used as a basis to sort out your thoughts. "For example, if you love to cook and are good at it, 'cooking' could fulfill the categories of 'what the world needs' and 'what you can be paid for.' Your aim could be a modest one, such as catering a friend's party, or bringing smiles to the faces of those who have enjoyed your food. Though it may be difficult to fulfill all four categories, by keeping them in mind, you can make your *ikigai* even more fulfilling."

